COLUMBIA COLLEGE FINE ARTS SERIES

PRESENTS

THE ORESTEIA OF AESCHYLUS

Color Film

Produced by

The Department of Greek

Randolph Macon Woman's College

COLUMBIA COLLEGE AUDITORIUM

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7:30 P.M.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

THE AGAMEMNON

As the play opens, a watchman waits before the palace of King Agamemnon at Argos for the signal fire that will herald the downfall of Troy. Inside the palace wait the two people who hate Agamemnon most--his wife Klytaimestra and his cousin Aigisthos, who have been living together while Agamemnon fought at Troy.

Klytaimestra's hatred for her husband stemmed from his sacrifice of their daughter to the gods in order to obtain a safe voyage to Troy. Aigisthos shared her hatred for Agamemnon because he was the rightful king of Argos; Agamemnon's father had slain Aigisthos' brothers and stolen the throne.

When the signal indicating the fall of Troy is sighted, Klytaimestra lights the sacrificial fires and announces the news to the chorus, which rejoices in the victory while mourning the destruction of war and voicing the fear that the citizens of Argos will turn against their king because so many lives have been sacrificed.

Agamemnon's triumphal entrance, with the Trojan princess and priestess Kassandra whom he has taken as a concubine, interrupts the chorus. Klytaimestra greets him warmly, orders a royal carpet spread for his entrance to the palace, and bids him enter. As Agamemnon enters the palace Kassandra envisions violence. After predicting her own death and that of Agamemnon she too enters the palace. The chorus philosophizes briefly, but is interrupted by the anguished screams of Agamemnon. The chorus then demonstrates its inability to act by expressing twelve different opinions as to what should be done.

The palace gates open, revealing the bodies of Agamemnon and Kassandra. Klytaimestra, standing beside them, declares herself to be their slayer. Aigisthos appears with soldiers admitting that he planned the double murder. The act closes with their defiance of the chorus to blame them for what they have done.

THE CHOEPHOROI

The second act opens with Orestes, the exiled son of Agamemnon, offering a prayer to Hermes, god of the underworld, beside his father's tomb. He leaves a lock of his hair as an offering.

He steps into the background as his sister Elektra approaches with the chorus of captive maidens of the castle, who are her friends.

Elektra beseeches her friends to advise her as to the prayer she shall make in presenting her offering. The chorus urges her to pray for a deliverer--"Send Orestes home, and may an avenger be sent to slay the slayers of Agamemnon."

Elektra discovers the lock of hair as she pours her libation. As she ponders the significance of this discovery, Orestes steps from the background and convinces his sister he has returned from exile.

Orestes and Elektra lament together their father's death and Elektra reports Klytaimestra's dream to Orestes, who interprets it as an indication that he should avenge his father's death.

Orestes then poses as a stranger reporting his own death and gains audience with Klytaimestra, who feigns grief. Aigisthos hears the report of Orestes' death from the chorus. Expressing disbelief, he seeks out the "messenger" and is slain by Orestes. Klytaimestra enters and is in turn threatened with death by Orestes. She appeals for mercy but, after hesitating briefly, Orestes forces her into the palace. The palace gates open to reveal the bodies of Klytaimestra and Aigisthos. As the second act closes, Orestes is visited by the dreaded Furies who plague those who commit matricide. He flees to seek purification at the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

THE EUMENIDES

As the third act opens, Orestes, surrounded by the loathsome Furies, awaits Apollo at the temple of Delphi. Apollo enters and bids Orestes flee to Athens, where he shall submit his case to judgment. The ghost of Klytaimestra appears and reprimands the sleeping Furies, charging them to continue their pursuit of Orestes.

Despite Apollo's charge that their pursuit of Orestes is unjust, the Furies follow him to Athens to the temple of Athena, goddess of wisdom. Athena appears and listens to the charges of the Furies and the reply of Orestes. She then appoints judges from the best of the citizens of Athens, and establishes a tribunal to hear the case. This tribunal is the famous Areiopagos, the oldest court of our civilization, and a hotly debated political issue at the time the play was performed in Athens. Orestes claims he was justified in slaying his mother because it was done in expiation for the slaying of his father. He urges the Furies to pursue Klytaimestra rather than him.

The Furies declare their persecution of Orestes just because Orestes was blood kin to his victim, while his mother was not a blood relative of those she slew. Apollo, acting as advocate for Orestes, backs Orestes in the claim that he was not blood kin to his mother, declaring that the father is the real parent, the mother merely being the nurse of the seed.

The decision of the judges is split evenly, and Orestes is declared acquitted through the vote of Athena. The enraged Furies are calmed by Athena, who finally persuades them to remain in Athens as guardians of ordered justice. The play closes as the Furies, followed by the citizens of Athens, are led to sanctuary.